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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000875

SENSITIVE  
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E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#) [KWMN](#)  
SUBJECT: SAUDI WOMEN'S MOVEMENT TAKING PRAGMATIC NEW  
APPROACH

REF: A. RIYADH 824  
[1](#)B. JEDDAH 78

RIYADH 00000875 001.2 OF 002

SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (U) Saudi activists have recently launched a campaign calling for substantial improvements in women's rights in 27 areas including gaining independent legal identities equal to those of men and improved educational and economic opportunities. Activists are currently canvassing support throughout the Kingdom, but have yet to submit any formal petition to the King or complaints against individual ministries. The campaign represents a new trend among women's rights groups in the Kingdom with a strategy of identifying specific changes needed to expand women's rights and proposing pragmatic steps to implement the changes. End Summary.

"STOLEN RIGHTS" CAMPAIGN  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) A group of Saudi activists led by Kholoud al-Fahad, a blogger and former journalist from the Eastern Province, launched in June 2009 the "Stolen Rights" campaign, based on a belief that "women's rights are God-given, but have been lost or stolen and need to be regained." The campaign seeks to remove cultural and traditional restrictions on Saudi women that have become mistakenly identified over time as part of Islam. These restrictions, according to al-Fahad, hinder Saudi women from achieving their full rights as independent legal persons. This has resulted in a marginalized role for Saudi women, which has had a detrimental effect on development in the Kingdom. Al-Fahad and other campaign organizers are utilizing modern campaigning techniques to seek active support and signatures from all corners of the Kingdom. Eventually, the organizers plan to present a petition directly to King Abdullah calling for full rights in 27 areas focused on the legal status of Saudi women and increased educational and economic opportunities for them.

[1](#)3. (U) The 27 demands in the Stolen Rights petition include many of the issues that are in the forefront of Saudi public debate on women's issues, such as:

- Giving women full financial rights by eliminating the need for sponsors, guardians or mediators;
- Educational opportunities equal to those of men, including equal resources, funding and training opportunities;

-- Lifting the ban on women driving;

-- Increased job opportunities in government, including allowing women to work in the tourism sector and providing vocational job training for women without an education.

#### MOVING TOWARDS A COHESIVE AND MODERN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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¶4. (SBU) Spearheading the campaign, al-Fahad is using technology and mass media to build support for Stolen Rights.

By taking advantage of the Internet and social networking and chat sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Paltalk, Stolen Rights is attempting to breathe new life into the Saudi women's movement by reaching out to a new generation of "ordinary," albeit technologically-savvy, Saudis. One day after emailing the campaign's website, Embassy Poloff received an invitation to join Stolen Rights' Twitter network. However, al-Fahad opined in Arab News that "women's rights activists are still not active and enthusiastic enough" and must be re-engaged in the Stolen Rights campaign.

¶5. (SBU) Ref B describes efforts in a similar direction being spearheaded by a Jeddah-based organization, the Khadijah bint Khuwailid Center (KBKC). Named after the Prophet Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah, the center lobbies for women's rights by identifying barriers to women's full participation in the economy, and proposing "realistic" solutions that are sufficiently non-threatening to be achievable. The center recently succeeded in getting the Ministry of Commerce to agree to publish new regulations affirming that women could obtain licenses to do business in any field open to women. (NOTE: these regulations have yet to be fully implemented

RIYADH 00000875 002.2 OF 002

throughout the country, however, and do not address the requirement for a male relative to hold a power of attorney to conduct business on the woman's behalf. End note.)

#### CULTURE VS. RELIGION

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¶6. (SBU) Campaign activists point to old traditions and Saudi cultural practices, not Islam, as the reason Saudi women are oppressed and lack equal rights. Al-Fahad asserted that "Since the very beginning, Islam has provided women with full rights and fair treatment in each and every life issue, including the rights to education, travel, drive, manage money and businesses, divorce and marriage." Campaign activists believe, however, that the Saudi religious establishment deprives Saudi women of these rights by interpreting and applying a Shari'a rule that advises "closing the doors of vice," to mean a ban on anything that could potentially lead to vice. As a result, instead of enjoying these rights, Saudi women are forced to relinquish control over their own lives to a male guardian, are unable to drive and cannot participate in sports and many recreational activities. Al-Fahad opined in an article in Arab News that "change will take place when moderation overtakes extremism" and that "more moderate voices in religious advocacy need to be heard."

¶7. (SBU) The line separating culture and religion is blurred in Saudi society, and many Saudis, as well as non-Muslims, do not know where one ends and the other begins. (Comment: For example, although the Quran states only that women must dress modestly, the Saudi religious police enforce a strict dress code that dictates even the color and style Saudi women must follow. The black robe or abaya that Saudi women are forced to wear according to Saudi law, is thus a cultural rather than religious requirement. End Comment.)

¶8. (SBU) OPINION POLLS: Though Embassy contacts often

dismiss such groups as not representative and claim that gaining full rights is "not a priority" for most women, opinion polls suggest that most Saudis favor empowering women to make basic choices about their lives. A Gallup poll conducted in late 2007 in the Kingdom found that majorities of both women and men surveyed supported freedoms for women, including equal legal rights (79 percent of women, 67 percent of men), the right to hold any job for which a woman might be qualified, the right to hold leadership positions in the government, and the right to drive. These findings were confirmed in a poll commissioned in early 2009 by the KBKC, which found that over 60 percent of both men and women polled in the Jeddah area supported expanded rights for women.

COMMENT

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19. (SBU) A leading Saudi human rights activist, Ibrahim Muigaiteeb, recently opined that the legal status of women was the most pressing human rights issue in the Kingdom (Reftel). Until now, the Saudi women's movement has been inchoate, with diverse groups pushing separately on various agendas such as the right to drive or better job opportunities, rather than developing a unified movement aimed at achieving full legal rights for women. The Stolen Rights campaign's list of 27 demands reflects a more sophisticated and comprehensive approach and uses mass media technology to broadcast its message. It suggests the emergence of a re-energized "modern" Saudi women's movement that may finally be able to marshall the broad support and technical and legal know-how needed to overcome the social and cultural traditions which marginalize Saudi women.

ERDMAN